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Homophobia and Sexism 101

An analysis of why homophobia exists and the way it works

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism. By Suzanne Pharr. Chardon Press, 1988. \$9.95.

If you are a lesbian or gay man, you already know the things Suzanne Pharr has to tell you in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*. You know that homophobia can threaten your physical safety, your mental health, your job, your credibility, your relationships. You know what it means to feel invisible. You will receive Pharr's text with a wince of recognition.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't read it.

The strength of this slim book — at 91 pages, really more of a long essay — is its concise, coherent explanation of a complicated matter. Pharr discusses the iron links between sexism — differential treatment and attitudes about people based on gender — and homophobia.

The reason gay men and lesbians become targets of homophobia, she argues, is because they upset the rigid rules of sex-appropriate behavior; they threaten a system grounded on male dominance and female passivity. And the roots of this sexism, she concludes, are burrowed deep in economic power. In the end, the problem boils down to who's got what (at recent count, the richest one percent of Americans owned as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent) and who wants to keep it that way.

Is it really that simple? Of course not. Pharr's book is neither the first nor the definitive study of the web between money, power, class, gender and gay and lesbian discrimination. (She does give credit where it's due, citing essays by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.) This volume is more like a short-course, a *Homophobia and Sexism 101*.

Like any introductory college course, Pharr's presentation sacrifices nuance for brevity and leaves questions unanswered. The text suffers from over-generalization; for instance, she asserts that blatant homophobia is more acceptable than blatant racism because "there has not been a major, visible, lesbian and gay movement." Some might argue that Stonewall ignited a decade of visibility lesbian and gay activism; in any case, her statement oversimplifies a complex issue.

The book is split into five chapters; in the first, Pharr outlines the tools of patriarchy that work to keep women in their places and lesbians invisible — economic clout, violence and homophobia. Explaining how homophobia affects all women, she writes that "to be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male... And any woman who steps out of role risks being called a lesbian."

In later sections, Pharr describes how that threat of being labelled and ostracized affects the behavior of all women, causing heterosexual women to distance themselves from

lesbians and forcing lesbians to push their own identities underground.

Based on her own experience as co-chair of the Lesbian Task Force of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Pharr tells how "unlike heterosexual women, lesbians are asked to bring only the asexual, asocial part of ourselves to the feminist workplace... We are asked to pass."

And as a longtime leader of workshops on homophobia, she knows how that demand affects lesbians. Women have described to her how "their true selves appear only at rare, safe moments... they have traded wholeness for heterosexual privilege and survival in a sexist society."

These sections, along with the very personal introduction, comprise the strongest part of Pharr's book. Because she uses few specific examples and usually writes in the general "we," the excerpts that carry power are those drawn from her own experience at being an "out" lesbian while directing a county-wide system of Head Start programs. "Because I had not hid as a lesbian," she writes, "I endured life-threatening phone calls, police harassment at my house, personnel committee meetings that I was not allowed to attend."

In final chapters, Pharr rushes too quickly through a discussion of various oppressions and their common elements. In a brief 12 pages, she mentions economic power, the myth of scarcity, invisibility, stereotyping, internalized oppression and assimilation, concepts that could each carry a chapter of their own.

Her conclusion is that lesbians must work together, struggle against invisibility, defeat isolation by sharing their stories and believe themselves worthy of freedom. In a list that mysteriously lacks specifics, she recounts some national projects that are moving toward those goals. (Portland's Lesbian Community Project earns mention as "a lesbian community building project that organized a conference" in an unnamed Northwest city).

Effective work for lesbians should blend the best aspects of consciousness raising, support and political action, Pharr says. "Our movement will be simply our part of this larger movement for freedom... We will recognize that we all go forward together or ultimately not at all."

Is this a new idea? Of course not. But at a time when society constantly drums the value of individual success, the notion of collective action is worth hearing again. And again.

Pharr's book makes explicit — in a clear, if cursory analysis — the knowledge most lesbians and gay men carry with them every day. She may be preaching to the persuaded. But her readers can do something about that. Read the book, nod with recognition and remember how much you already know. The give it to someone — your cousin, your boss, your father — for whom it will be brave, new territory. ▼

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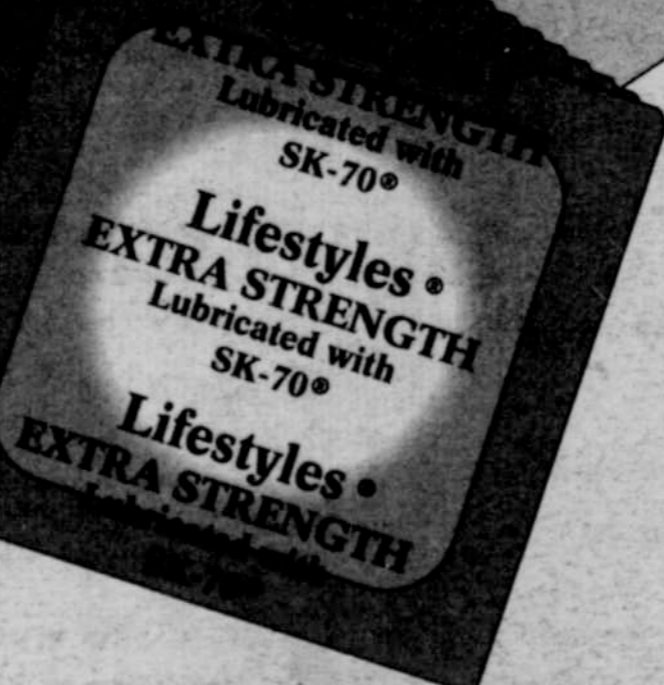
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